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European perspectives towards the rise of Asia: contextualising the debate

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Abstract To what extent can we speak of a distinctively 'European' security approach towards the Asia-Pacific region? In order to address that timely question, this article examines how Britain, France, Germany and the European Union (EU) are framing their evolving security roles in the Asia-Pacific region, and how those individual perspectives intersect with each other. The article identifies a number of important common features in Europe's approaches towards security in the Asia-Pacific, namely the tendency of most European actors to emphasize the economic and diplomatic nature of their contribution to regional security, their promotion of regional multilateral security fora, their rejection of the notion that China's rise is inherently challenging for regional and global security, and their willingness to signal their differences towards Washington's emphasis on military power and alliance-based approach. However, and despite the existence of common traits, individual European actors show different degrees of closeness vis-à-vis the US and China and feature different perspectives regarding which security relationships they should prioritize in the region (if any), or the appropriate balance between diplomacy and security and defence cooperation. Such divergences prevent Europeans from developing a coherent security profile in the region and preclude us from speaking of a distinctively European security approach towards the Asia-Pacific.

The Asia-Pacific region has emerged out of the global financial crisis as the main engine of global economic growth. The region holds the largest proportion of the world's foreign currency reserves (Lai and Ravenhill 2012) and has recently replaced North America as Europe's most important trading partner (European Commission 2015). However, geopolitical tensions in the Korean Peninsula, the East and South China Seas, and Taiwan constitute ongoing threats to stability in the Asia-Pacific, and cast a shadow upon Europe's own economic interests in the region. In addition to that, the geopolitical rise of the Asia-Pacific has important implications for Europeans elsewhere. Their growing need for energy and raw materials is leading Asian countries

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westwards onto parts of the European neighbourhood, notably the Middle East and Africa (Simón 2015). Against this backdrop, there is a widespread recognition that Europe's own prosperity and security have become increasingly dependent on economic growth and geopolitical stability in the Asia-Pacific (Korteweg 2014; Reiterer 2014; Simón 2015). In turn, the main Asia-Pacific powers (notably China, Japan and South Korea) have become important players in the fight against non-traditional global security threats, such as climate change, maritime piracy or international terrorism, and offer important opportunities for cooperation with Europeans at that level (Hwee 2004).

In recent years, questions related to the rise of Asia and its implications for Europeans have generated much attention amongst European foreign and security policy scholars. Much of this attention has focused on Europe's main powers and their evolving security priorities in the Asia-Pacific (see, e.g. Blount 2013; Butler 2006; Heiduk 2015; Godement 2014; Kundnani 2014; Moni 2006). In turn, the question of the EU's security role and emerging relationships in the Asia-Pacific is also generating considerable coverage in academic journals and think tank publications (see, e.g. Berkofsky 2014; Keohane 2012; Kirchner 2005; Murray 2008; Stumbaum 2015; Reiterer 2014; Youngs 2015). However, the crucial question of how the security roles of Europe's main powers and institutions in the Asia-Pacific intersect with each other has been rather neglected in the literature (for a notable exception, see Kerr and Xu 2014). In fact, it has become commonplace to speak of the EU's role in Asia and that of Europe almost interchangeably (see, e.g. von Hofmann 2007; Korteweg 2014; Tsuruoka 2013). This conflation is somewhat problematic. Not least, Europe's leading powers use the EU to channel some of their security priorities and initiatives towards the Asia-Pacific, but not others. Because of its 'normative' orientation (Manners 2002) and emphasis on economic cooperation and multilateralism, the EU can prove rather useful to Europe's leading member states whenever they want to emphasize the 'economic' and 'diplomatic' nature of their engagement in the Asia-Pacific, signal their differences with Washington's military and alliance-based approach and convey an image of geopolitical equidistance vis-à-vis regional security questions. However, there is more to that. In fact, when engaging in security and defence cooperation in the Asia-Pacific, Europe's key powers tend to show a preference for bilateralism. Thus, any effort to understand the security role Europeans are playing in Asia must necessarily take into account a wide variety of actors and initiatives.

This article addresses the question of to what extent we can speak of a distinctively 'European' security approach towards the Asia-Pacific. To do so, it examines Europe's security role(s) in the Asia-Pacific through the lens of Britain, France, Germany and the EU, and analyses how those individual approaches intersect with each other. In illuminating these four individual angles, the article identifies common features as well as contradictory elements. Something (most) Europeans share is their tendency to emphasize the economic and diplomatic nature of their engagement in the Asia-Pacific, as well as their preference for multilateral solutions to regional security challenges. This way, Europeans typically try to chart their own course—one that contrasts with Washington's alliance-based approach and greater emphasis on military power. Relatedly, most Europeans avoid taking a clear stance on territorial disputes in the Asia-Pacific, strive to maintain so-called 'partnerships' with different Asia-Pacific powers and often eschew the notion that China's rise is inherently challenging for the regional and global order.

Beyond these common traits, however, individual European approaches to security in the Asia-Pacific vary significantly. Britain tends to attach greater importance (than other Europeans) to developing bilateral security and defence ties with 'like-minded' democracies and traditional US allies in region, a practice that contrasts with the lack of any meaningful security dialogue with China. Having said this, London is also very much interested in furthering its investment and trade ties with China, which may partly explain why it adopts a softer tone (than the US) on territorial disputes in the South and East China seas. In contrast to Britain, the military-strategic component is practically absent from Germany's approach towards the Asia-Pacific, which is driven by an emphasis on trade, diplomacy and multilateralism. Berlin is focused on developing links to regional multilateral security organizations and eschews any appearance of favoring the security interests of any regional countries over those of others, notably China. Such an approach serves well Berlin's (growing) economic interests in the Asia-Pacific. France stands somewhere in between, as it seeks to balance its emerging bilateral strategic relationships with countries like Japan or Australia with an ongoing military-to-military dialogue with China and publicly highlights the contrast between its own emphasis on diplomacy and multilateralism and Washington's alliance-based and military-oriented approach. These variations amongst the key European powers also reflect in the EU, whose main concern is to continue to develop its relations with its main economic partners in the Asia-Pacific (especially China), and its security engagement in the region is dominated by an emphasis on diplomacy and multilateralism.

The article draws on an analysis of official documents and public pronunciations produced by the four European actors under examination, as well as over 15 confidential interviews with British, French, German and EU officials. The first section introduces some of the main security challenges currently affecting the Asia-Pacific region and outlines their potential implications for European security. The second section examines the evolving security role of Britain, France, Germany and the EU in the Asia-Pacific as well as their engagement with the region's main actors. The third section features a cross-case analysis that seeks to draw some conclusions about the similarities and differences in the way Europe's main powers engage in/with the Asia-Pacific.

The Asia-Pacific: main security trends and implications for Europe

Most contemporary discussions on Asian security revolve around the geopolitical implications of the rise of China (see, e.g. Buzan 2010; Ikenberry 2008; Shambaugh 2004/5). Over the last decade, China has become the main engine of economic growth in the Asia-Pacific to such an extent that the economic growth and well-being of many countries in the region are largely dependent on their ties to that country (Shambaugh 2004/5). This has given Beijing increasing economic and diplomatic leverage throughout the region and beyond. Moreover, its strong economic growth has presided over an expansion of Chinese political confidence as well as a process of military modernization. This, in turn, has strengthened Beijing's political confidence and strategic position vis-à-vis long-standing regional territorial disputes, i.e. Taiwan, East China Sea, and South China Sea, and led to widespread speculation as to whether China is—or might soon be—in a position to challenge the existing regional security order (see, e.g. Holslag 2014).

The lack of clarity regarding China's strategic intentions prompted the US Department of Defense to announce a 'rebalancing' towards the Asia-Pacific region in early 2012 (Department of Defense, 2012). Ever since, the US has devoted greater strategic resources to the Asia-Pacific region and strengthened its bilateral defence relations with a number of key allies and partners, notably Japan, Australia, Singapore, the Philippines or Vietnam (Lord and Erickson 2014). To be sure, the US has not yet abandoned its broader aim of turning China into a 'responsible stakeholder' in the international system. Washington recognizes China's importance to regional and global economic stability, as well as its potential role vis-à-vis important global security challenges, including nuclear proliferation, climate change, cyber-security, etc. (Ikenberry 2008). However, the erosion of the regional military balance and China's increasing assertiveness in the East and South China seas have led many in Washington to embrace the idea that the US is in a competitive strategic relationship with China (see, e.g. Mahnken 2012)

Several countries in the Asia-Pacific have also expressed growing concerns about the potential implications of China's geopolitical and strategic rise for regional security. This has been particularly felt in those countries that have territorial disputes with China in the East and South China Seas. Perhaps, most notably, Japan is adopting an increasingly pro-active stance towards regional security issues. Ever since Prime Minister Abe's re-election in December 2012, Tokyo has increased its defence budget and eased the legal restrictions on its Self-Defense Forces, strengthened its bilateral alliance with the US and expanded its diplomatic role and security ties with a number of South East Asian countries (see, e.g. Watanabe 2015). For their part, countries like Vietnam or the Philippines worry about China's increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea and have sought to strengthen their own military and maritime surveillance capabilities, reinforce their bilateral ties with the US and embraced Japan's adoption of a more pro-active regional role (Malesky and Morris-Jung 2014; Sidel 2014).

Most of the countries that are not immersed in territorial disputes with China (i.e. South Korea, Thailand, Malaysia) want to avoid being perceived as taking any sides in any such disputes as well as in relation to the emerging process of geostrategic competition between China and the US. While they understand that the rise of China could upset the regional balance of power, and even welcome greater US strategic engagement in the region, they value their economic and political ties with the Asian giant too much to even give the appearance of taking part in any sort of regional coalition to counter-balance the rise of China. This logic broadly applies to ASEAN itself, which, despite including some members that have territorial disputes with China, avoids implicating itself in such disputes as an institution and prefers to frame its dialogue with China around economic issues (Rolls 2012).

Even though the US and those regional countries implicated in territorial disputes value enormously their economic and diplomatic ties with China (Kim 2015), the regional security picture is becoming increasingly polarized. What does that bear for Europeans? On the one hand, attitudes towards the US and the transatlantic relationship play an important role in framing European security perceptions of the Asia-Pacific (Simón 2015). One clear manifestation of that is the ongoing EU-wide arms embargo against China. On the other hand, their geographical distance from the Asia-Pacific, their lack of formal defence commitments there (bare some exceptions) and their relative incapacity to project military-strategic power into the region means

Europeans are well-positioned to exercise some form of mediating security role by way of diplomacy and an emphasis on multilateralism and economic cooperation. Many in Europe believe such an approach would play to Europe's own strengths and is the only way to avoid greater regional polarization and tensions (see, e.g. Reiterer 2014). Some form of 'go between' role, so the logic goes, could reap important diplomatic and economic dividends for Europeans, as it would both enhance their diplomatic room of manoeuvre and allow them to continue to expand their economic ties to all parties.

An emphasis on diplomacy, multilateralism and economic cooperation would help shift the conversation away from the military-strategic balance, a question where, allegedly, Europeans do not have much to contribute. These sorts of arguments are generally used in relation to the EU, an actor known for its 'soft power' and multilateral credentials (Scott 2014). However, some scholars argue that they also apply to most European powers, in that their security profile in the region is rather testimonial and their main concern is to maintain their economic ties to the key regional powers, especially China (see, e.g. Casarini 2015; Kundnani 2014). Admittedly, these maxims do hold true for most European actors, but they do so to different degrees and in different ways. After all, all Europeans are relatively incapable of projecting strategic power into the Asia-Pacific, but some are more capable than others. Conversely, they all attach much importance to maintaining strong economic (and diplomatic) ties with China, but some attach just as much importance—perhaps even more—to their strategic relationship with the US and long-standing (bilateral) security ties with like-minded Asian countries.

To what extent, then, can we speak of a 'distinctively' European security approach towards the Asia-Pacific? In order to address that question, the next section examines how Britain, France, Germany and the EU frame their evolving security profiles in the Asia-Pacific. In doing so, it paves the way for the second section, which looks at how the approaches of Europe's main powers and institutions intersect with each other. In order to operationalize the research question, both the next section and the cross-case analysis featured in 'Making sense of diversity: is there a 'distinctively' European security approach towards the Asia-Pacific?' revolve around the attitudes of Europe's main powers and institutions towards four interrelated themes, namely the role of the US in the region, the rise of China, the balance between diplomacy and military instruments and between multilateralism and bilateralism. By focusing the analysis on these four key aspects of Europe's evolving role in the region, the article aims to provide a framework through which patterns of convergence and divergence in European security approaches towards the Asia-Pacific can be identified. This, in turn, should provide a foundation to address the question of whether we can speak of a distinctively European security approach towards the Asia-Pacific region.

European security perspectives towards the Asia-Pacific

Britain and the Asia-Pacific: global power and global responsibilities

Britain defines itself as an 'open, outward-facing nation' that constitutes a 'vital economic and political link in the global network' (United Kingdom Cabinet Office

2010: 3–4). As such, it understands that its own security is directly tied to the upholding of its interests and values in the world. Upholding such interests requires 'the capability to act well beyond its shores' and to work with its allies—'principally the United States'—to 'have a strategic presence wherever it is needed' (UK Cabinet Office 2010: 4). The ability to project military power on a global scale and the 'special' relationship with the US are core tenets of UK foreign policy and are therefore indispensable to understand Britain's evolving security role in the Asia-Pacific.

As a globally oriented 'seapower , Britain is arguably uniquely positioned amongst Europeans to engage strategically in the Asia-Pacific—a distinctively maritime geopolitical environment. The British government's recent decision to 'return East of Suez through the opening of a number of military installations in the Persian Gulf, the reinvigoration of the Royal Navy and the ongoing efforts to deepen strategic ties with India (especially in the maritime domain) are most telling in this regard. Britain's increasing emphasis and presence in the Indian Ocean (including its base in Diego Garcia) clearly underscores its ability to project strategic power to the Pacific (Stokes and Newton 2014; Kelly and Stansfield 2013; Rogers 2013). Furthermore, its special relationship with the US and the latter's intention to rebalance its strategic priorities towards the Asia-Pacific constitute both a reason and an asset to further British engagement with that region's security dynamics (Blount 2013). In the words of (former) UK Foreign Secretary William Hague, 'The UK understands that a stable and prosperous Asia-Pacific matters to British interests. And in a networked world, where physical geographical distance becomes steadily less important in determining global affairs, this will continue to grow as a shared interest in relations between the UK and US' (Hague 2014).

The legacy of the empire continues to manifest itself through multiple cultural and political ties between Britain and the Asia-Pacific to this day. Notably, the 'Asia-Pacific' is home to Hong Kong (which was part of the UK until 1997) as well as a number of Commonwealth countries including Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Papua New Guinea, as well as the islands of Solomon, Samoa, Nauru, Kirimati, Tonga and Vanuatu. Indeed, its colonial heritage and historical role continue to mediate Britain's engagement and interests in the Asia-Pacific. Not least, such heritage translates into ongoing defence commitments to a number of like-minded countries, all of which maintain either alliances or special security relationships with the US. Britain's security commitments in the Asia-Pacific are enshrined in three formal treaties. The first is the Collective Security Treaty in South-East Asia, also known as the 'Manila Treaty , signed on 8 September 1954 by Australia, New Zealand, France, Pakistan and including Bangladesh, the Philippines, Thailand, the UK and the US. Even though the SEATO (the military organization that emanated from such Treaty) was disbanded in 1977, the treaty remains in force.

Britain is also a member of the United Nations Command Military Armistice Commission in Korea (UNCMAC), by which it is legally bound to contribute to the upholding of the status quo in the Korean Peninsula. Last but not least, Britain also takes part in the Five Powers Defence Arrangements (FPDA). Signed in 1971 between the UK, Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand and Singapore, the FPDA commits each of the parties to consult with each other in the event of external aggression or threat of attack against Peninsular Malaysia or Singapore. However, since its inception, the FPDA has gone beyond its initial emphasis on the air defence of peninsular Malaysia

and Singapore to address asymmetric threats, maritime security issues and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief tasks (Thayer 2007).

Multilateralism is also an important feature in Britain's security approach to the Asia-Pacific. Beyond the more formal, alliance-type commitments, Britain is present in a number of regional multilateral security initiatives and fora in the Asia-Pacific. In 2012, Britain joined the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP). ReCAAP was established in 2004 and includes most nations from North East Asia (including China), South East Asia and South Asia as well as the US and a number of European countries (Britain, Denmark, the Netherlands and Norway). Its purpose is to combat piracy and armed robbery against ships in South East Asia, for which it leans on the establishment of an Information Sharing Centre in Singapore. Britain is also a regular participant in the Shangri-La Dialogue (an intergovernmental security forum attended by over 20 Asia-Pacific and South Asian countries plus Britain, France and Germany held annually in Singapore by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, a British think tank), the USPACOM Chiefs of Defence Conference (held annually and involving all countries from the Asian and American rims of the Pacific plus Britain and France) or the annual Asia-Pacific Intelligence Chiefs Conference, which involves directors of military intelligence from about 30 nations from the Asia-Pacific and South Asia as well as Canada, Britain and France. In addition to that, Britain participates regularly in RIMPAC, the world's largest multilateral naval exercise.

Its state-of-the art naval capabilities, its expanding basing infrastructure in the Indian Ocean (most notably in Diego Garcia) and its longstanding strategic ties with a number of Asia-Pacific countries (especially Australia and Singapore) underpin Britain's ability to project strategic power onto the Asia-Pacific and substantiate its security commitments in South East Asia and the South Pacific. Not least, Britain maintains to this day a (limited) military footprint in South East Asia confined to Brunei and Singapore. In Brunei, Britain keeps a 900-strong permanent garrison, predominantly drawn from the Ghurkhas. The purpose of the garrison is to provide security for the country as a whole, and the costs are borne by the Brunei Sultan (Humphrey 2012). In Singapore (the historical hub of British naval power in the Far East), the UK retains to this day a large fuel depot and berthing wharves in Sembewang dockyard, which can provide berthing access for up to three escorts at a time plus access to fuel and spare parts. Moreover, London maintains a wider set of individual exchange posts, particularly in Australia and New Zealand, as well as defence attaches in Australia, New Zealand, Brunei, China, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia and Singapore.[1]

One of the most notable developments relating to Britain's expanding security role in the Asia-Pacific has been the decision to develop a strategic relationship with Japan. In April 2012, UK Prime Minister David Cameron and (former) Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda issued a joint statement pledging to enhance strategic ties between their two countries. The pledge resulted in the signing of UK–Japan Defence Equipment Cooperation Framework and an Information Security Agreement in July 2013. These two security agreements, the first of such kind between Japan and a country other than the US, have paved the way for bilateral strategic cooperation at various levels, including armaments research and development, intelligence sharing,

[1] Author's interview with UK defence official in London, 17 December 2014.

military-to-military cooperation and military educational exchanges, etc.[2] They also include a track 2 dialogue involving Japan's National Institute for Defense Studies and Britain's Royal United Services Institute. The UK–Japan strategic partnership concentrates primarily on the security of 'the global commons, on the high seas, in cyberspace and in outer space' and on deepening military-to-military and industrial ties (Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2014). However, bilateral UK–Japan strategic pronunciations explicitly avoid any references to security issues directly related to the Asia-Pacific, beyond 'recognizing' that region's 'increasing importance' (Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2014). This appears to be a deliberate attempt on Britain's part to avoid excessively alienating China.[3]

Like other European countries, Britain 'does not take a position on the underlying issues of sovereignty in the South and East China Seas' (Swire 2014). London encourages all the countries in the region to 'build mutual trust, be transparent about their military development, work for regional stability, and settle disputes in accordance with international law' (Swire 2014). Britain's unwillingness to take a clear stance on regional territorial disputes is perhaps partly explained by the increasing importance it attaches to China, which is key to consolidating London's position as a key global hub in Europe–Asia financial trade. Britain is, by far, the first destination of Chinese Foreign Direct Investment into Europe and aspires to become the world's most important clearing house for renminbi trading outside of China (Casarini 2015). Interestingly, in mid-2015, Britain was the first big European country to announce it would join the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), ignoring US warnings about the bank's potential to challenge the Western-led global financial institutions and thus assist China's regional rise.

Having said this, London reserves for itself the right to express its opinion whenever thinking that 'one country or another is behaving provocatively and that regional stability is being put at risk' (Swire 2014). In what seems yet another reference to China's increasingly assertive stance in the East and South China Seas, London insists that 'great power invokes great responsibility, and those countries that are, or aspire to be, great powers have a duty to take seriously their responsibility towards other nations in the region… to be candid about their intentions, to be transparent about their motives, and to be more open about their capabilities' (Hammond 2014).

France and the Asia-Pacific: is strategic equidistance sustainable?

Like Britain, France prides itself on being one of the few European countries that has a global approach to security. Its nuclear status, its permanent member status in the UN Security Council and its possession of global power projection capabilities and an extensive diplomatic, intelligence and overseas basing network substantiate that aspiration. However, for all the interest in keeping the 'global power narrative alive, French strategic documents clearly identify Europe and its 'extended southern neighbourhood (running from the Gulf of Guinea in the west, through the Sahel-Maghreb 'continuum and the Mediterranean and Red Sea onto the Gulf of Aden and the Western Indian Ocean) as the country's main political and strategic referents (Simón

[2] Author's interview with UK defence official in Brussels, 14 January 2015.
[3] Author's interview with UK defence official in Brussels, 14 January 2015.

2013). Having said that, France acknowledges the increasing economic and strategic importance of what it refers to as the Asia-Pacific and has recently taken a number of initiatives aimed at strengthening its presence there (French Ministry of Defense 2013).

France justifies its interest in Asia-Pacific security dynamics on three main counts. Firstly, its ambition to remain a global power comes with 'special global security responsibilities', and that certainly includes a commitment to security and stability in the Asia-Pacific (French Ministry of Defense 2014). Its membership of the UN Military Armistice Commission in Korea and its presence in a number of regional multilateral security fora and initiatives (i.e. Shangi-La Dialogue, USPACOM Chiefs of Defence Conference, Asia-Pacific Intelligence Chiefs Conference, RIMPAC) bear testament to this fact. Secondly, its colonial heritage binds France to the Asia-Pacific culturally and diplomatically. This is illustrated by the membership of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam of the International Organization of the Francophonie (of which Thailand is also an observer) as well as by France's membership in the Collective Security Treaty in South East Asia or Manila Treaty. Last but not least, its territories in the South Pacific Ocean (New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, French Polynesia, and Clipperton Island) make France a resident power in the Asia-Pacific writ large.

France not only sees Asia as 'the main driver of growth worldwide' and acknowledges that region's 'vital role in globalization', but also shows concern about the fact that 'the risks of tension and conflict' there 'are among the highest in the world' (French Ministry of Defense 2013: 56). In France's mind, Europe's economic prosperity and security are directly affected by developments in the Asia-Pacific region. In particular, the 2013 French White Paper on Defence and National Security singles out the security of the Indian Ocean, 'Europe's main maritime access to Asia', as a priority for France and for Europe (French Ministry of Defense 2013: 26). Notably, France maintains some 2600 soldiers and several air combat and naval units permanently stationed in the Indian Ocean Region distributed alongside its several sovereign territories in that ocean (Mayotte, Reunion and the Scattered Islands as well as the French Southern and Antarctic Territories) and its overseas military installations in the United Arab Emirates and Djibouti. Those forces are in a state of high readiness and are thus available to be deployed to the Asia-Pacific theatre should the need to do so arise (French Ministry of Defense 2014: 10).

Its sovereign territories in the South Pacific come with very specific security and defence responsibilities. France maintains over 2500 military and civilian defence staff permanently stationed in the South Pacific, the Armed Forces in New Caledonia (FANC) and those in French Polynesia (FAPF) ensure the protection and safety of French territories, the surveillance of the exclusive economic zones and the State's action at sea. As a resident Pacific power, France is also involved in a number of sub-regional security fora in the South Pacific (i.e. the South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting, the South Pacific Chiefs of Defence Conference and the Central and South Pacific Coast Guard Forum) as well as in the broader Western Pacific (i.e. Western Pacific Naval Symposium).

France identifies the 'legacy conflicts of the Cold War' (in the Korean peninsula, between Russia and Japan, and in the Taiwan Strait) and 'territorial disputes in South and East Asia' as the main sources of geopolitical tension in the Asia-Pacific region and acknowledges that these could lead to an open conflict (French Ministry of Defense 2014: 4). Beyond calling all parties to respect international law and the freedom of

navigation, and claiming its own special global responsibilities (as a Permanent member of the UN Security Council), France does not take a particular stance in territorial disputes. In fact, France often sees 'equidistance' as a useful referent to define its strategic stance in the region (Godement 2014).

France's efforts to strike a narrative of 'strategic equidistance in the Asia-Pacific manifest themselves in different ways. One is to emphasize a certain degree of distance from the US. In the words of French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius, some 'form of a Chinese-American G2' (…) 'would mean a loss of strategic independence' or 'even an obligation to choose' for Europe and the countries of South East Asia (Fabius 2013a). Indeed, what 'draws together ASEAN, Europe and France is the determination to build a genuine, organized multi-polar world, in which the EU and ASEAN play a stabilizing role.' (Fabius 2013a) Admittedly, France is 'undertaking a "pivot" to Asia', but it is doing so 'not to follow the crowd' (i.e. the US) but because it 'wants to be present where tomorrow's world is built' (Fabius 2013a). Moreover, in contrast to the US pivot to Asia, which is 'primarily military', France's own pivot is 'more diplomatic' (Fabius 2013a).

In France's view, the best way to mitigate current geopolitical tensions and security risks in the Asia-Pacific is through the promotion of multilateral such as the ASEAN Regional Forum.[4] Indeed, France sees ASEAN—an organization it considers to be partly inspired by the EU—as the embryo for a multilateral and stable regional architecture for peace and security in the Asia-Pacific (Fabius 2013a). Paris conceives of its own security role in the region as being primarily confined to transnational threats, especially 'combatting terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery, cyber threats, as well as in favour of the security of global sea lanes of communication' (Fabius 2013a).

Reaching out to China is also an important part of French efforts to show 'strategic equidistance in Asia.[5] France perceives China to be an 'essential partner', particularly given its enormous economic potential, and its status as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council and growing global power, which make it key to the resolution of international crises and the seeking of solutions to global challenges (Fabius 2013a: 4). Moreover, Paris believes 'China has thus far not been an expansionist power' and believes it is its responsibility to contribute to 'bolstering that choice' through engagement (Fabius 2013b). This largely explains its interest in further developing its strategic ties with China and fostering a military-to-military dialogue with that country (French Ministry of Defense 2014). In fact, France is one of the main exporters of dual-use technology to China, which is serving to bolster the capabilities of the People's Liberation Army as well as those of the Chinese coast guard.[6]

Over the last 2 years, France has also sought to further its security ties with Japan. At a bilateral meeting in June 2013, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and French President Francois Hollande vowed to strengthen the security relationship between their countries and decided to set up a 'two plus two' process—an annual meeting of their respective foreign and defence ministers. The first Franco-Japanese 'two plus two'

[4] Authors' interviews with various French defence foreign policy and defence officials in Paris, May 2014-May 2015.
[5] Authors' interview with French defence official in Paris, 19 May 2014.
[6] Author's interviews with multiple European officials in Tokyo and Seoul, Nov 2014.

took place in January 2014 in Pari and focused on identifying key avenues for future cooperation, including the possible joint development of military equipment, greater intelligence ties, military-to-military cooperation (especially in the realm of maritime security and anti-piracy) and cooperation in the realm of civilian nuclear energy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2014).

While both parties are committed to furthering their security ties, France is keen to avoid the perception that its ties to Japan are motivated by its willingness to mitigate the (regional) challenges associated with the rise of China.[7] Particularly telling in this regard were Laurent Fabius' remarks in the French Senate just before the first Franco-Japanese 'two plus two' meeting in Paris, where he proclaimed that 'in a multipolar world', France does 'not have to choose between China, Russia, or even Japan' (Sénat de France 2014). This would seem to (partly) explain France's preference for directing its security conversations with Japan onto industrial and global issues (i.e. anti-piracy, peacekeeping, cyber-security, etc.), where potential frictions with China would be less manifest.[8] For its part, Tokyo has protested on several occasions to Paris due to the latter's continuous transfer of dual-use systems to China, which Japan believes are serving to strengthen China's coast guard capability and thus undermining the balance of power and stability in South East Asia.[9]

Germany and the Asia-Pacific: is there life beyond trade?

Germany is often described as a 'civilian power and 'value-oriented actor, one that emphasizes diplomacy, economic cooperation and multilateralism as the appropriate instruments for strengthening international peace and security (Harnisch and Maull 2001; Wolff 2013). In addition to that, its interest in fueling its export driven economy can sometimes lead Germany to prioritize beneficial trade agreements over the promotion of international norms and thus work against its civilian power image. Both its trade interests and its civilian power identity mediate Germany's conception of the Asia-Pacific and its engagement in that region.

Germany's relations in the Asia-Pacific are characterized by its strong economic ties with the region and its special relationship with China, which is currently the second most important market outside Europe (after the US) for German exports. In 2011, China has become the so-far only East Asian country with which Germany holds annual government-to-government consultations (*Regierungskonsultationen*). These consultations, which are in effect joint cabinet meetings, probably best illustrate the high status which Germany ascribes to its relations with China and demonstrate the depth and comprehensiveness of this 'special' relationship (Heiduk 2015; Kundnani 2014).

Germany has a strong interest in strengthening bilateral and multilateral cooperation with its Asia-Pacific partners to tackle global security challenges such as climate change, piracy or cybercrime.[10] However, Berlin has been somewhat reluctant to engage in regional security issues proper. Some analysts have even alluded to the fact

[7] Authors' interviews with multiple French defence foreign policy and defence officials in Paris, May 2014-May 2015.
[8] Author's interview with French Asia expert in Tokyo, 19 November 2014.
[9] Author's interviews with multiple Japanese foreign and defence policy officials in Tokyo, November 2013.
[10] Authors' interviews with multiple German foreign and defence policy officials in Brussels, May 2014-May 2015.

that German officials tend to be 'dismissive of the attempts by France and the UK to play a role in regional security through defence cooperation with countries such as Japan' (Stanzel and Kundnani 2014). However, as Germany finds itself confronted with growing security challenges in the European neighbourhood, it increasingly perceives the Asia-Pacific as a source of diplomatic support. In fact, Germany has considerably strengthened its security dialogues with East Asian countries to discuss regional security challenges in Ukraine, the Middle East or North Africa (Stanzel and Kundnani 2014; Pollmann (2015).

When it comes to security in the Asia-Pacific, Germany shows a clear preference for multilateral settings. International security conferences, such as the Shangri-La dialogue and the Munich Security Conference, offer Germany a useful opportunity to strengthen its security dialogue with Asian partners and emphasize the global nature of such dialogue. Insofar as the Asia-Pacific proper is concerned, Germany has become increasingly engaged in supporting efforts to strengthen regional integration, having emphasized the need to strengthen the role and capacity of ASEAN (ASEAN 2015). While Germany's cooperation with ASEAN focuses primarily on questions related to climate change, regional economic integration and institutional/capacity development, bilateral exchanges also feature informal dialogues on regional and global security issues, including the evolving situation in the South China Sea. Beyond its engagement with ASEAN, Germany is a staunch supporter of current EU efforts to become a member of the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Defense Minister Meeting Plus (ADMM+) and continues to advocate for the strengthening of multilateral security institutions in the region.

In recent years, Germany has also made efforts to strengthen its bilateral security dialogues in the Asia-Pacific. During government-to-government consultations in 2014, Germany and China agreed to expand their bilateral strategic dialogue and strengthened its security dimension by holding a regular security dialogue between representatives from both countries' defence ministries. Also in 2014, Germany and Japan agreed to hold bilateral Politico-Military (PM)/Military to Military (MM) consultations, as well as a regular 'Track 1.5 Japan-Germany Security Dialogue' between government officials.

To be sure, Germany's bilateral security dialogues with China and Japan are rather modest. On the one hand, the EU-wide arms embargo against China constitutes a clear limitation to any meaningful security ties between Berlin and Beijing. On the other hand, Japanese officials repeatedly insist that their bilateral military-strategic dialogue with Germany remains far less advanced than that with France or the UK and perceive Berlin's economic and political closeness with Beijing as a clear obstacle to a truly meaningful German–Japanese strategic dialogue.[11] In turn, the Republic of Korea appears to be a more promising security partner for Germany. Germany's history of division and reunification make it a unique asset when it comes to advising South Korea in its ambition to achieve a peaceful process of unification on the Korean peninsula. In this context, Germany and South Korea set up an 'advisory group on the foreign policy considerations of the reunification of Korea' in September 2014, which might provide Germany with a privileged role in the Korean peace process.

[11] Interview with multiple Japanese officials in Tokyo and Brussels, November 2014-January 2015.

The EU and 'East Asia : a security partnership in the making?

The EU's foreign and security policy is most commonly characterized as being driven by normative principles and the promotion of effective multilateralism (Manners 2002). However, much as is the case with Germany, the EU's value-driven approach and its promotion of multilateral solutions are seen as being compromised by economic interests, which play a crucial role in the EU's relations with the Asia-Pacific (Zimmermann 2007). Indeed, the EU's strategy for East Asia (its preferred term to designate the region) highlights the increasing importance of inter-regional trade, as well as the interdependence between European prosperity and geopolitical stability in East Asia (Council of the European Union 2012).

To date, the EU's role in East Asian regional security affairs is a marginal one, as illustrated by its exclusion from the main international fora in which Asian security affairs are debated, namely the six-party talks with North Korea, the East Asia Summit (EAS) or the ASEAN Defense Minister's Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus). However, in its recent East Asia Policy Guidelines (Council of the European Union 2012), the European Union has underlined its political and economic interest in the region's stability by highlighting its increasing dependence on a stable trade flow with East Asia. Such stability is menaced by swelling tensions and growing nationalism in the East and South China Sea, as well as by the increasingly volatile situation in the Korean peninsula.

To be sure, a number of structural limitations stand in the way of a meaningful EU security engagement in East Asia. One is the Union's emphasis on its immediate neighbourhood, especially in the context of mounting geopolitical instability in Eastern Europe, North Africa and the broader Middle East. Another important factor has to do with lack of progress in the framework of the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP). Finally, and relatedly, divergent priorities amongst its leading member states inhibit a coherent or, for that matter, strong EU security role in the Asia-Pacific. This has been particularly visible in the EU's ambivalent attitude towards the arms embargo against China (Casarini 2007) or the debate over the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) (Renard 2015).

Despite these limitations, however, the EU's ambition to position itself as a 'credible political and security actor in the region' (European External Action Service 2014; Council of the European Union 2015b) and the willingness of East Asian strategic partners to become more active as global security providers may result in greater security cooperation between both regions. In this regard, the EU has particularly highlighted non-traditional security threats (NTSTs), such as the fight against piracy, international terrorism, climate change, cyber crime and natural disasters, as potential areas for inter-regional security cooperation (Council of the European Union 2012; European External Action Service 2014). This is in fact something that resonates well with the EU's East Asian partners. In particular, the EU-led ATALANTA mission to fight piracy off the coast of Somalia has provided a useful framework to promote cooperation between the EU, Japan, South Korea and China (Reiterer 2014) Moreover, the EU has undertaken steps to step up its cooperation with ASEAN in the area of maritime surveillance, port security and disaster relief and increased its engagement in strengthening regional maritime capacity building in South East Asia (Council of the European Union 2012).

One of the EU's preferred tools to further develop its profile as an international security actor in this regard is the so-called Framework Participation Agreement (FPA), which establishes the legal foundation for third countries to get involved in EU crisis management operations. In May 2014, South Korea became the first (East) Asian country to sign an FPA with the EU, which further institutionalizes EU-ROK security cooperation, especially at the operational level. Some scholars have referred to the FPA as the 'third pillar' of the EU-ROK strategic partnership by adding a security dimension to the general political framework and the bilateral free trade agreement (Minard & Pejsova 2014). Currently, no other EU strategic partnership enjoys such a strong institutional foundation. The EU envisions a similar agreement with Japan, which promises to lead to a deepening in EU–Japan political, economic and security ties in the coming years.[12] The Abe administration's ambition to strengthen Japan's 'Proactive Contribution to Peace' promises to facilitate greater EU–Japan security cooperation (Council of the European Union 2015b)—a prospect from which both sides are likely to benefit. An institutionalized security partnership with Tokyo might help boost the EU's profile as a security actor in East Asia.[13]

In November 2013, the EU and China adopted the so-called '2020 Strategic Agenda', which aims to strengthen bilateral cooperation in the area of global security, with a special emphasis on transnational challenge (EEAS 2013). In recent years, both parties have engaged in common efforts to counter piracy off the coast of Somalia, with the People's Liberation Army Navy contributing to the broader EU anti-piracy effort escorting vessels from the World Food Programme. Beijing has also taken on an increasingly active role in UN peacekeeping missions, thus opening further possibilities for EU–China cooperation. After sending its first ever combat troops to join a UN peacekeeping mission to Mali in 2013, China announced in September 2014 that it would contribute a 700 personnel infantry battalion to the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). However, anti-piracy efforts, notwithstanding its increasing engagement in peacekeeping missions, have not yet led China to contribute to EU-led crisis management operations. In this regard, it is important to note that the EU arms embargo against China constitutes an important obstacle to the development of bilateral security cooperation.[14]

Insofar as regional territorial disputes are concerned, the EU has made it repeatedly clear that it will 'not in any sense take positions' (Council of the European Union 2012) or 'get into the legitimacy of specific claims' (European External Action Service 2015). Instead, the EU has become an outspoken advocate for the need to maintain an international maritime order based on the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). It has further expressed its support for negotiations between China and ASEAN to develop a Code of Conduct for maritime affairs and offered its assistance and expertise for enhancing regional maritime security cooperation (Council of the European Union 2012; European External Action Service 2015). Moreover, while emphasizing the need for diplomatic solutions, the EU organized a training session on preventive diplomacy and mediation in the framework of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 2014 (Reiterer 2014:18). Altogether, its approach of not taking

[12] Authors' interview with EU official in Brussels, 24 April 2015
[13] Authors' interview with EU official in Brussels, 27 November 2014.
[14] Authors' interview with EU official on 24 September 2015.

positions in territorial disputes and instead emphasizing diplomacy and multilateral solutions has partly led to the manifestation of the EU's image as a 'neutral' or 'impartial' regional security actor in East Asia (see, for example, Pejsova 2014; Ueta 2013; Kundnani and Tsuruoka 2014; Youngs 2015), a position that is often viewed as inherently linked to EU concerns about burdening its economic partnership with China (Youngs 2015:11–12).

Finally, the EU's role as a security actor in the region is increasingly shaped by its re-engagement with ASEAN. Over the past decades, ASEAN has evolved as a key actor in the development of East Asia's regional security architecture and played a pivotal role in connecting the wider East Asian region by setting up a number of regional organizations, including the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Defense Minister Meeting Plus (ADDM+). The EU has traditionally perceived ASEAN as a natural partner in East Asia, not least given their similarities in terms of status and mission, i.e. to promote regional integration and political cooperation in their respective regions. However, it is only relatively recently that the Union has focused on strengthening its bilateral strategic ties with ASEAN (Youngs 2015:13). In May 2015, the EU proposed to bump up its relations with ASEAN to the level of a strategic partnership and announced it would double its financial assistance to that organization (Council of the European Union 2015a). In this regard, the EU decided to appoint an ambassador to ASEAN, who took office in September 2015, and to join ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), a non-aggression and cooperation pact between ASEAN members. Moreover, the EU has become increasingly outspoken in its support for East Asian regional integration, which it sees as the best guarantee of economic prosperity and geopolitical stability over the medium and long term, both in South East Asia and in East Asia more broadly (European External Action Service). In this regard, its engagement with ASEAN is closely connected to its broader ambition to become a member of the East Asia Summit and the ADDM+.[15] Thus, the EU perceives its relationship with ASEAN as a useful asset to strengthen its security profile in East Asia.

Making sense of diversity: is there a 'distinctively' European security approach towards the Asia-Pacific?

This section examines how the security roles of Europe's main powers and institutions in the Asia-Pacific intersect with each other, with a view to identifying some of the main patterns of convergence and divergence. Figure 1 depicts the positions of the four European actors under examination in light of their preferred regional partners and means of engagement. The figure does not build on any quantitative data, but rather draws on the above empirical analysis to illustrate, in a comparative fashion, how Europe's key actors position themselves vis-à-vis some of the key security issues in the Asia-Pacific. In particular, it seeks to illustrate Europe's approach(es) towards the four main themes discussed throughout the article, i.e. the role of the US, China's rise, bilateralism vs. multilateralism and economic/diplomatic engagement vs. security and

[15] The EU has repeatedly expressed its interest to be included in these regional organizations, both of which include Russia and the US (Council of the European Union 2015).

defence cooperation. It goes without saying that the categories depicted herein are hardly ever exclusive. Figure 1 cannot possibly capture the complexity of every individual European security approach towards the Asia-Pacific. For instance, Britain's security approach to the Asia-Pacific features a strong preference for bilateralism and greater closeness to the US. However, London is also supportive of multilateralism, values greatly its economic (and political) ties with Beijing and features a rather ambiguous stance vis-à-vis regional territorial disputes.

For the sake of visual clarity, Fig. 1 features only two axes. However, these two axes are very much intertwined, and both are illustrative of European positions vis-à-vis the four main themes identified. The vertical axis assesses the kind of regional partners Europeans prioritize and to what extent that choice is informed by economic or security considerations. An emphasis on traditional, like-minded partners bespeaks a preference for bilateralism, greater closeness to the US and a certain degree of skepticism vis-à-vis China. In turn, a focus on 'economic partners' indicates greater distance to the US, a more 'neutral' approach towards China, and tends to be associated with a preference for multilateralism. The horizontal axis assesses the preferred means of engagement in the region, i.e. economic/diplomatic vs. security and defence cooperation. Given the absence of strong regional multilateral security institutions, security and defence cooperation often takes place on a bilateral basis. Those European actors who favour bilateral security ties tend to somewhat mirror Washington's own approach, i.e. emphasizing traditional, like-minded partners to the detriment of China, who is subject to an EU-wide arms embargo. In turn, those European actors who confine their

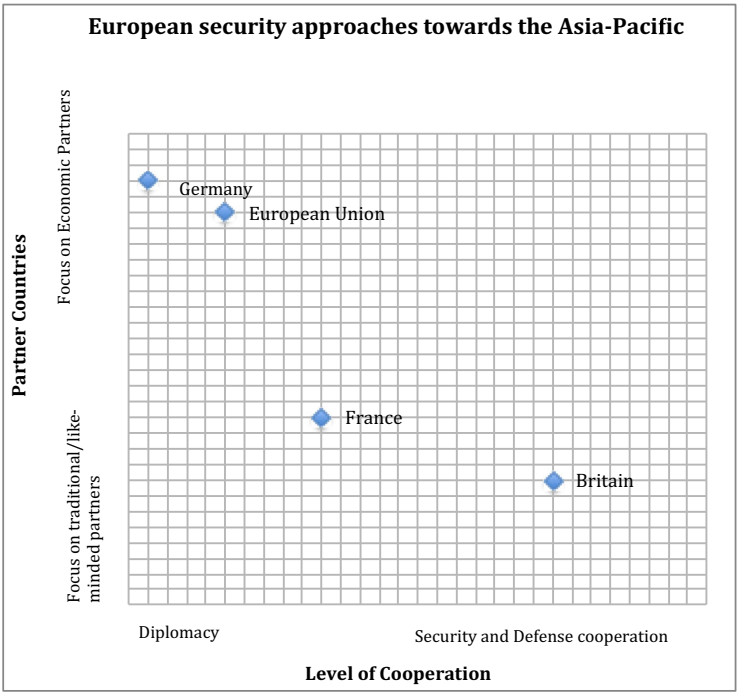

Fig. 1 Positions of the four European actors under examination in light of their preferred regional partners and means of engagement

engagement in the Asia-Pacific to the diplomatic and economic level have a clear preference for multilateral frameworks, show greater distance from America's military and alliance-based approach and a more neutral attitude towards China.

Britain's approach towards the Asia-Pacific features an important emphasis on bilateral security and defence cooperation with like-minded partners. Such approach is largely mediated by its historical ties to its former colonies, its close bilateral strategic ties to the US and its own condition as a maritime and global power. The strategic reach in the Indian Ocean region, its 'legacy alliances in South East Asia (with Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei) and the South Pacific (Australia and New Zealand), its growing interest in maritime security in South East Asia (exemplified by its engagement in ReCAAP) and its efforts to deepen its bilateral strategic ties with Japan represent the cornerstones of Britain's security approach to the Asia-Pacific.

Notably, Britain's approach to the Asia-Pacific is largely compatible with—and indeed broadly mirrors—that of the US. Both Britain and the US emphasize the geostrategic contiguity between the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean. As far as the Indian Ocean is concerned, London and Washington share security partners in the southern Persian Gulf, are both interested in expanding their bilateral strategic ties with India and see the joint US–UK facility in Diego Garcia as a key asset in support of their strategic projection alongside the 'Indo-Pacific . Similarly, both the US and the UK emphasize their strategic relationships with Australia and Singapore as the two main 'gateways to the Indo-Pacific, as well as with Japan, with whom the US maintains an alliance and the UK is currently developing its security ties. An important way of strengthening these partnerships is through trilateral, quadrilateral and multilateral naval exercises in the Indian Ocean, involving Indian, Australian, Japanese, US and British vessels. However, in contrast to the US, Britain officially eschews any clear line on territorial disputes in East Asia to avoid excessively alienating China. Furthermore, London's decision to join the Chinese-led AIIB, demonstrated its willingness to disregard US warnings and put its own economics interests above security considerations.

Germany's security approach towards the Asia-Pacific is notoriously cautious. Its engagement in the region is primarily confined to trade, and its diplomacy is characterized by an emphasis on its main regional economic partners (esp. the so-called special relationship with China) and a preference for multilateralism. Germany has neither the capability nor the will to project strategic power into the region and, unlike Britain (or France), has not shown a particular interest in developing preferential security relationships with countries like Japan or Australia. Germany takes part in some regional security dialogues (such as the Shangri-La Dialogue) and supports the idea of greater EU engagement in regional security, primarily through the furthering of diplomatic ties with ASEAN. However, Berlin is particularly keen not to appear to be taking sides in any of the region's territorial conflicts, partly in order to avoid alienating any of its partners and jeopardizing its strong economic position in the region.

Beyond the Asia-Pacific proper, a number of Asia-Pacific countries are developing a greater economic and diplomatic interest in other parts of the world and becoming increasingly interested in tackling global and transnational challenges. This process presents some opportunities for Germany, which appears to be increasingly interested in a broader security and political dialogue with its Asia-Pacific 'partners . Currently,

the bulk of Germany's foreign and security policy energies are concentrated in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. In that context, Berlin understands that its bilateral relations with a number of Asia-Pacific partners can prove most resourceful in terms of garnering diplomatic support for its initiatives in the broader European neighbourhood, i.e. in its response to the evolving political situation in Ukraine or the ongoing challenge of the Islamic State. More broadly, Germany takes a leading role in advocating for greater international and multilateral cooperation in tackling non-traditional global security threats, such as climate change, disaster relief and risk management. In that context, its political ties to China and other Asia-Pacific partners work in favour of its aim to promote effective multilateral responses.

France's approach to Asia-Pacific security seems to lie somewhere in between those of Britain and Germany, in that the country seeks to balance its emerging bilateral security relationships with like-minded partners with an ongoing security dialogue with China and an emphasis on multilateralism and diplomacy. France has overseas territories in the South Pacific, and its colonial legacy lives on through alliance commitments such as the Collective Security Treaty in South East Asia or the presence of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam in the International Organization of the Francophonie. Much as it is the case for Britain, the Indian Ocean constitutes the main prism through which France looks at the Asia-Pacific. However, France is primarily concerned with the western part of the Indian Ocean, where most of its territories in that ocean are located.

Like Britain, France is also in the process of deepening its bilateral strategic ties to key Indo-Pacific powers, namely India, Australia or Japan. However, in contrast to Britain's attempt to link those relations to the US and explore trilateral and quadrilateral formats, France's ties to these countries are primarily bilateral in nature. Furthermore, they are generally more restricted in their geographical scope. The relationship with India, for instance, is primarily confined to the Indian Ocean context and that with Australia to the South Pacific. France's relationship with Japan focuses primarily on defence-industrial issues and is in any case less advanced than Britain's. In fact, France's parallel efforts to maintain a fluid security relationship with China constitute a limitation to French–Japanese security relations. Arguably, the best illustration of this problem is France's ongoing transfer of dual-use capabilities to China, against which Japan has consistently and vocally complained. Like Germany, France emphasizes multilateralism and regional security cooperation and underscores the potential of the EU in that regard.

France also enjoys strong security ties with the US. However, if Britain's relationship with the US is more global in scope, France's is more restricted geographically and is particularly strong now in Africa. In fact, when articulating its own security narrative about the Asia-Pacific, France makes a consistent effort to distance itself from the US. Notably, Paris emphasizes its 'diplomatic and 'multilateral credentials, and the fact that they represent a clear contrast with Washington's alliance-based approach, which places greater emphasis on military power.

The plurality of views represented by Europe's main powers may partly explain why the EU can often appear modest—even equivocal—when articulating its strategies and policies towards East Asia. Reflecting primarily German and, to a lesser extent, French views, the EU's understanding of East Asia is distinctively economic. The EU tends to look at the region as a whole as an economic partner and build its security dialogues

and security cooperation efforts on strong bilateral ties with their main trading partners in North East Asia. The bilateral relationship with China stands out in terms of its importance. Both Germany and France constantly insist that the EU's security engagement in the region must carefully take into account Chinese sensitivities. However, they also have been increasingly active in promoting greater ties between the EU and ASEAN, which could provide European with access to regional security fora in which they are not represented, such as the East Asia Summit.

In yet another reflection of German and French views, the EU is focused on expanding its participation in regional security fora and emphasizing the potential for inter-regional cooperation in tackling 'non-traditional' security challenges such as climate change and piracy. Relatedly, both Germany and the EU favour a 'narrow' conceptualization of East Asia, which contrasts with British and French efforts to cast the region in a broader Indo-Pacific context.

The EU's security role in East Asia is currently a marginal one. However, its ongoing efforts to leverage its 'strategic partnerships' to expand its security cooperation with some East Asian countries in other parts of the world may well contribute to boosting the Union's credibility in the region as a political and security actor. This, in turn, could strengthen its own chances of becoming further integrated into existing regional security dialogues, such as the East Asia summit. Moreover, the EU's inclusion in the ASEAN Regional Forum, its experience as an international mediator (particularly in nuclear negotiations with Iran) and its security cooperation with its East Asian partners in global and 'non-traditional' security issues could bolster the EU's profile as a security actor in the region.

Conclusion

This article has sought to determine to what extent we can speak of a distinctively European security approach in the Asia-Pacific. To do so, it has examined the evolving security role of Britain, France, Germany and the EU in the region. Some important patterns of convergence have been identified. Critically, most Europeans tend to emphasize the economic and diplomatic nature of their engagement in the region and their preference for multilateral solutions. This contrasts with Washington's alliance-based approach and greater emphasis on military power. Most Europeans also eschew the notion that China's rise is inherently challenging for the regional and global order, as illustrated by taking a clear stance on the question of territorial disputes in the Asia-Pacific. These common traits form the foundation of a distinctively European security approach to the Asia-Pacific, i.e. one that differs from that of the US and other regional actors.

However, despite the existence of common traits, European security approaches towards the Asia-Pacific continue to be characterized by important patterns of divergence. As described in the previous section, Britain prioritizes bilateral security and defence cooperation with traditional US allies and like-minded partners, while Germany and the EU are focused on securing their diplomatic access to multilateral regional organizations. Furthermore, Britain appears to favour continued development of security relations through an Indo-Pacific framework, Germany and the EU seem to develop their security cooperation efforts through upstaging bilateral relations with

North East Asian countries and East Asian regional organizations. Within this framework, France finds itself in the middle of the spectrum, which might position it well to moderate future discussions on developing a European security strategy towards the Asia-Pacific region. Thus, and despite the existence of some common parameters, ongoing divergences prevent Europeans from speaking with one voice in the Asia-Pacific, and playing a stronger security role in the region. This constitutes an important limitation for the EU itself.

As already argued, Europe's main powers perceive the EU as a useful tool to emphasize the economic and diplomatic nature of their engagement in the region, signal their differences with Washington's more 'militaristic' and alliance-based approach and convey an image of geopolitical equidistance vis-à-vis regional security questions. However, even those actors who show greater proclivity for engaging in security and defence cooperation with selected partners (i.e. Britain and France) prefer to do so bilaterally rather than through the EU framework. In this regard, we could argue that the existence of a more coherent EU security approach to the Asia-Pacific is hindered by two main factors. Firstly, and unsurprisingly, ongoing national differences make it difficult to agree on a strong and coherent EU security role in the region.

Secondly, and perhaps most interestingly, even those member states that show a greater proclivity for engaging like-minded partners in security and defence cooperation prefer to so bilaterally. This may well be explained by the fact that preserving the image of a multilateral and neutral EU gives member states greater diplomatic versatility, i.e. by allowing them to cast themselves in national or EU 'clothing', depending on the circumstances. Further research on British, French and German views on the EU's security role in the Asia-Pacific could help further illuminate this important question. Finally, a comparative analysis of how Europeans and other 'external' actors (i.e. the US, Russia and India) approach the region may provide further insights as to whether we can speak of a distinctively European security approach towards the Asia-Pacific.

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